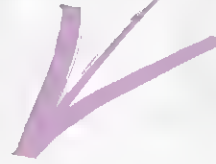


# **Narrative** THERAPY



Everyone's life is filled with stories. They can be positive, negative, serious or ridiculous, but they all play a role in shaping how a person sees himself or herself as well as who that person can become.

Narrative therapy examines such stories to pinpoint those that are contributing to problems in a person's life and then works on helping people "re-author" those stories to achieve the goals they wish to achieve.

## WHEN IT IS USED

Narrative therapy can be especially effective for people who carry certain negative labels, according to the article “Applications of Narrative Theory and Therapy to the Practice of Family Medicine.” The article’s authors found narrative therapy to be particularly beneficial for those who were seen as:

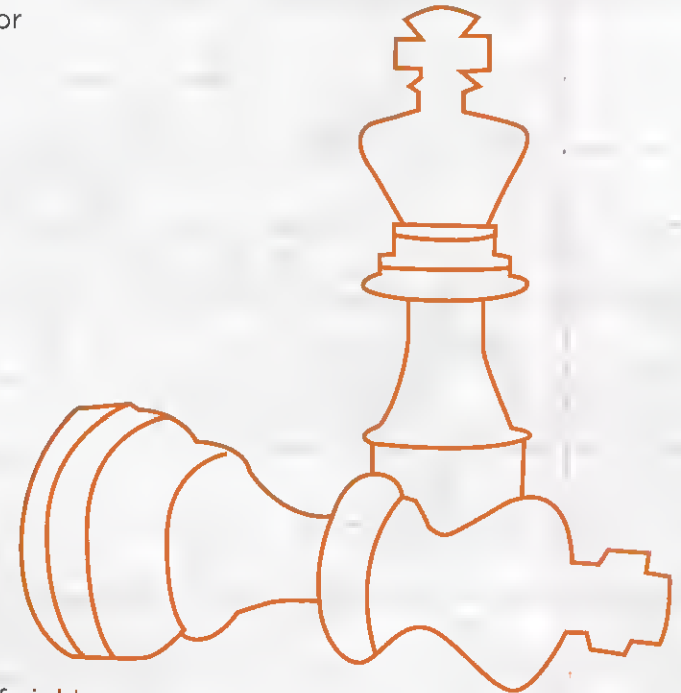
- Non-compliant
- Difficult
- Somatizing
- Self-defeating
- Depressed
- Anxious

The article, which was published in Family Medicine, specifically examined narrative therapy’s positive effects with difficult medical patients, but positive results have been seen with a variety of other issues. These can include everything from addiction to post-traumatic stress disorder, from self-harm to problems with personal and family relationships. DulwichCentre.com cites several studies:

### *Major Depressive Disorder*

A study published in Psychotherapy Research that involved a series of eight narrative therapy sessions for 47 adults with major depressive disorder found after the treatment:

- 74 percent of the participants showed sustained improvement
- 61 percent were moving in the direction of the “functional population”
- 53 percent showed significant improvement from a clinical standpoint



### ***Parent-Child Conflicts***

A study published in Research on Social Work Practice examined the effects of narrative therapy on reducing conflicts between parents and children. Six families participated, engaging in several narrative therapy techniques. Results noted:

- Five of the six families showed significant improvements in the parent-child relationship
- Conflicts in the participating families were reduced by 88 to 98 percent

### ***Unhealthy Habits***

A study published in the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy, the location that doubles as the birthplace of narrative therapy in the 1980s, examined behavioral changes in 45 cases where children had a habit of stealing. Narrative therapy resulted in:

- 80 percent of the children had either reduced rates of stealing or had not been stealing at all



# CHARACTERISTICS OF NARRATIVE THERAPY

Alice Morgan's book "What is Narrative Therapy?: An Easy to Read Introduction" outlines the basics of this therapeutic approach as well as some of its common techniques. She says narrative therapy:

- Is respectful and interactive, creating a true collaboration between the therapist and the person seeking therapy
- Refrains from blame
- Makes people the experts in their own lives
- Views people and their problems as separate entities
- Helps people use their skills, values, beliefs and abilities to decrease the power problems have over their lives

Two of the foremost principles in this type of therapy are:

- Always being curious
- Always asking questions

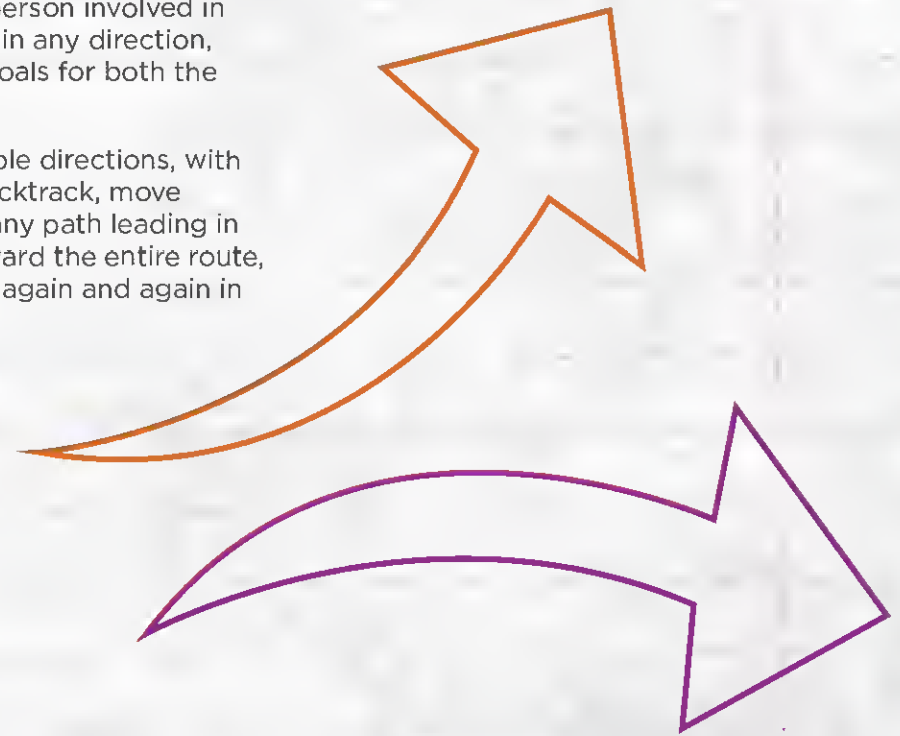


## NARRATIVE THERAPY BASICS

Narrative therapy does not follow a strict set of steps or components that people must use in a specific order to be effective. It instead offers up more of a smorgasbord, as Alice Morgan calls it, with a wide range of possible concepts from which people can pick and choose and use as it best suits them.

Morgan describes each question asked in the narrative therapeutic method as a journey, and the direction of that journey depends on the answer to the question as well as the next move the person involved in the therapy wishes to take. People can move forward in any direction, choosing those that will most effectively meet their goals for both the therapy and their life.

Each question additionally opens up a range of possible directions, with no “right” or “wrong” way to proceed. People may backtrack, move forward at warp speed, trod slowly sideways or pick any path leading in any direction, whether it’s sideways for a spell or forward the entire route, backwards for a spell or covering the same ground in again and again in greater detail each time.



## COMMON QUESTIONS IN NARRATIVE THERAPY

In the spirit of true collaboration, the therapist always checks in with the person seeking his or her help to ensure the journey is proceeding in a way the person wants it to. Morgan points out a slew of common questions that can crop up during narrative therapy sessions. The therapist may ask:

- How do you feel about this conversation? Is it working for you?
- Would you like to continue this conversation or would you prefer talking about (fill in the blank)?
- Do you find this conversation interesting or should we spend time discussing another subject?
- Should I continue to ask you about (this particular topic) or should we move our focus on (fill in the blank with other topics of conversation)?

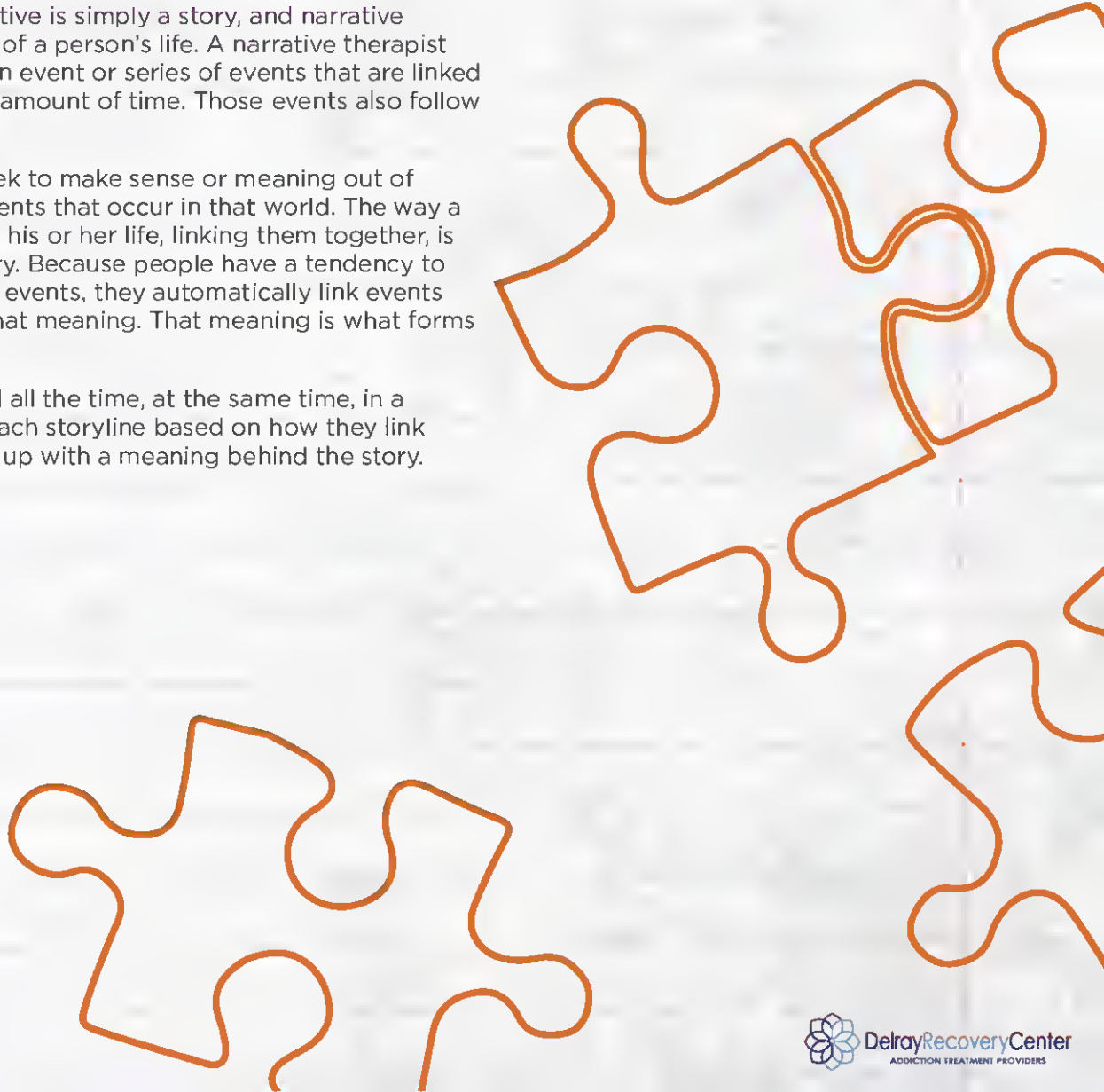


## THE 'NARRATIVE' PART OF THE EQUATION

In its most basic sense, a narrative is simply a story, and narrative therapy focuses on the stories of a person's life. A narrative therapist defines a story as containing an event or series of events that are linked in a sequence across a certain amount of time. Those events also follow some type of plot.

People by their very nature seek to make sense or meaning out of the world around them and events that occur in that world. The way a person interprets the events in his or her life, linking them together, is what forms the plot of the story. Because people have a tendency to want to create meaning out of events, they automatically link events together over time to create that meaning. That meaning is what forms the plot of the narrative.

Many stories are being created all the time, at the same time, in a person's life. People develop each storyline based on how they link the events together and come up with a meaning behind the story.





## EXAMPLE: A FAILURE STORY

Let's say a person has a story about himself being a failure, even if, in reality, he is a business owner who is financially secure with a loving family and an equally loving dog. His failure story may edge out other stories he has of happiness or success, becoming a dominant narrative in his life.

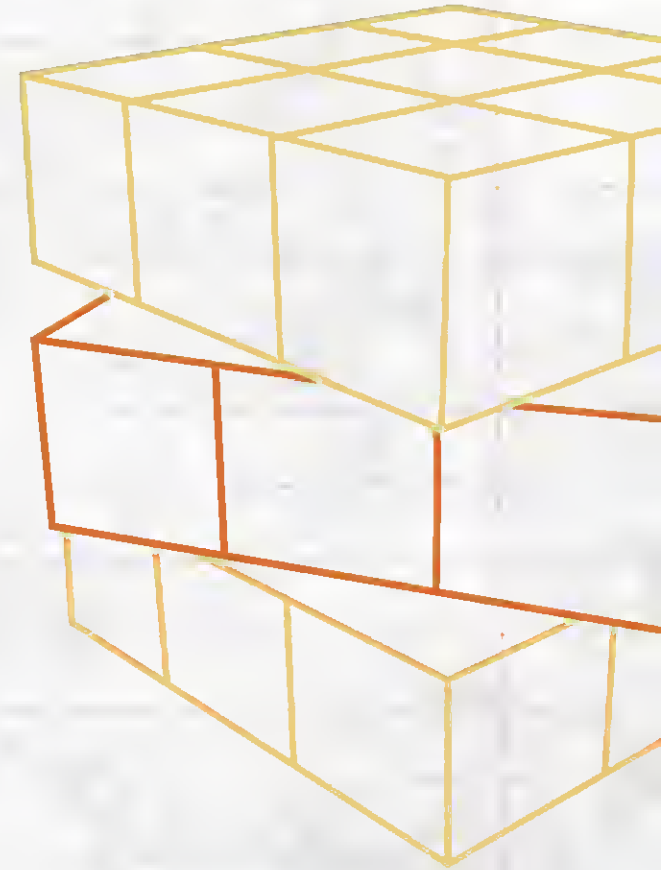
The man may have developed his dominant failure story by linking together a series of events that point to his failure. Perhaps he lost a spelling bee back in third grade for misspelling a short and easy word. Maybe his first girlfriend dumped him for a more "successful" senior in high school. The man may have experienced early business woes, past relationship catastrophes and other events that he selects out of the vast array of events in his life to fortify his failure story.

He downplays or ignores events or facts that don't fit with his failure story, such as his currently successful business and happy family and tail-wagging dog.

"In the retelling of stories," Morgan writes, "there are always events that are not selected, based upon whether or not they fit with the dominant plots."

The man continues on with his life, placing heightened emphasis on the events that further support his dominant plot of being a failure while treating events that point to success as much less significant or perhaps a random fluke in his overall life.

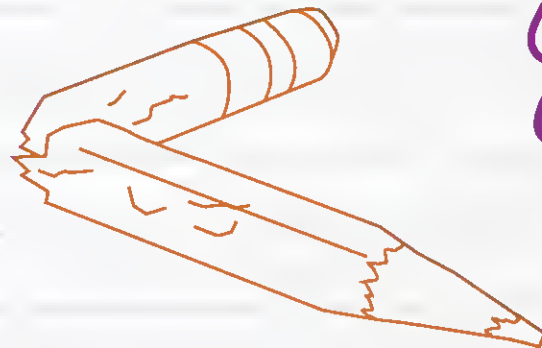
Many factors may have contributed to the development of the man's failure story in the first place, such as early feedback from his parents and influential adults as well as how he was viewed by those around him. Factors beyond his control may have also contributed to the development of his dominant narrative as a failure, such as his childhood home, economical state or even his height, weight, ethnicity or eye and hair color.



## FUTURE EFFECTS OF THE FAILURE STORY AND OTHER DOMINANT NARRATIVES

Not only has the man allowed his failure narrative to influence his life up to his current point, but it can continue to do so going forward. Whenever he's asked to try a new concept or take a risk, his failure story will crop up in his head, influencing his decisions and future plans.

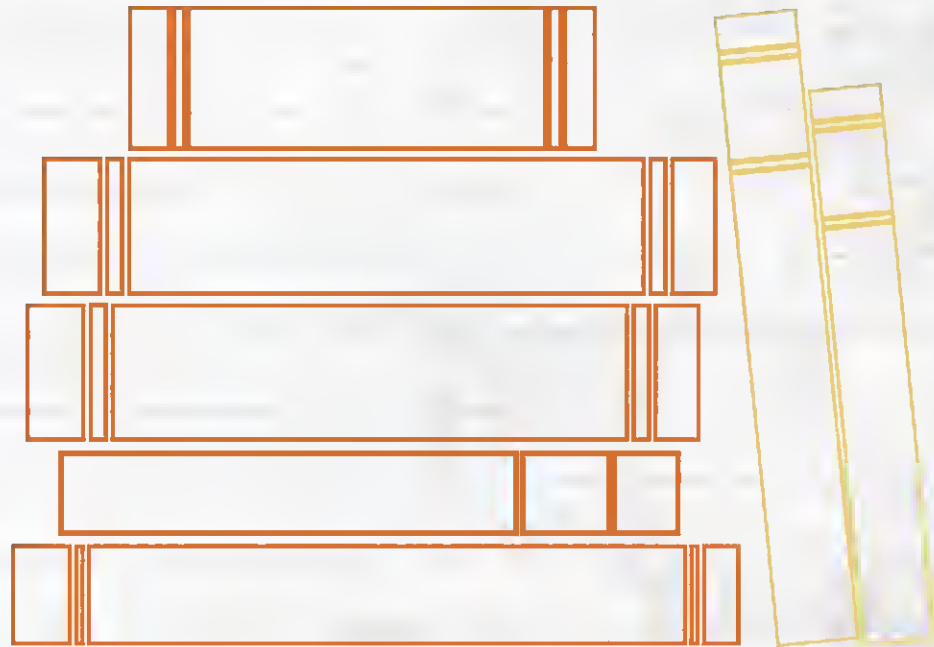
The same holds true for every dominant narrative in a person's life. They don't remain idle in the background but rather come to life to impact any number of actions, decisions and behaviors moving forward.



## AN ENTIRE LIBRARY OF LIFE STORIES

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# HOW AND WHY NARRATIVE THERAPY WORKS

People typically enter therapy to address and resolve problems and issues in their lives. Narrative therapy aims to address and resolve them through the use of a person's stories. As in the example of the successful man with his failure story, people often show up with a ready-made story based on life events that back up their story. A dominate story may be dominated itself by the person's unwavering interpretation of the story, placing the situation in a stark black or white with no room for additional interpretations of the events or overall plot.

Narrative therapy works to explore alternative stories that can replace existing problematic narratives and offer people a new way to live their lives. Narrative therapists will prompt conversations that bring up other events or thoughts that dispel the overriding problematic narrative by reducing its power and serving up a new realm of thinking, acting and living.

For instance, a narrative therapist may encourage the man with the failure story to engage in discussions of events and situations in which he was regarded as successful. Examples can certainly include the building of his own business, his loving family and even the way he quickly and easily trained his dog. Rather than focusing on losing a spelling bee in third grade and a girlfriend in his senior year of high school, the therapist may tease out stories of winning a writing content in fourth grade or winning the heart of his college sweetheart, who is now his wife.

Narrative therapy serves a dual purpose with a singular overall goal. It aims to help people break free of their life stories that are creating problems and re-author new, positive stories. Both moves can lead to the overall goal of ushering in a whole new realm of possibilities and way of living into their lives.

